

Fate Worse Than Death

by ChiefPam

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Summary: Lois is faced with an impossible choice, and must live with the results. With Superman dead, Clark will have to comfort her as best as he can.

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Fate Worse Than Death by Pam Jernigan Rated PG-13 Submitted September 1999

This is dedicated to Wendy, Irene, KathR, Merry, Mel, Tank, and everyone else from Zoom's message boards who helped me transform this from a vague idea into a (hopefully) coherent story in record time. They had to suffer through it in serialized installments, but they bore up bravely, and encouraged me every step of the way.

Fate Worse Than Death by Pam Jernigan (jernigan@bellsouth.net)

"Mm, that was a great dinner, Clark." Lois smiled at her date. Dating her partner had been a risk, and the relationship could still have occasional awkward moments, but for the most part, Lois was glad she'd accepted Clark's romantic overture.

Clark nodded agreement as they left the restaurant. "Yep, I love that place." Somewhat hesitantly, he put an arm around her shoulder. "Great pasta."

She snuggled in next to him, enjoying his nearness. Her body seemed to respond to him in elemental ways; sometimes that scared her, but right now she gave herself permission to enjoy it.

They talked about everything and nothing as they walked to her apartment, and Lois contemplated inviting him inside to stay for coffee ... or maybe more. She suspected it was the wine talking, but part of her really wanted to take their relationship further. She

hadn't felt like this about anyone since ... well, since Superman. The thought deflated her.

Well, maybe it was time to make her choice. Instead of waiting and hoping for Superman, maybe she should give him up and focus on Clark, who was pretty special in his own way. She glanced up at him, thinking of how to phrase her invitation, when she saw an abstracted expression cross his face.

"Clark? What is it?"

He looked down at her and smiled tightly, but his eyes were distracted. "And here we are, right at your building. Will you be okay to go up alone?"

Lois glared. "Of course I will, Clark, I do it all the time, but why?"

"Well, ah, I just remembered, uh--"

She threw up her hands. "Never mind. Don't tell me. I don't even want to know."

"Lois, I'm sorry--"

"Goodnight, Clark." She stormed up the stairs, angry nearly to the point of tears. Why did he keep doing that? Thank God she hadn't invited him in; at least she was spared that humiliation.

As she entered her apartment, the phone was ringing. She caught it on the third ring. "Hello? ... Oh, hi Dan ... a late movie?" She looked towards the street with an angry glitter in her eye. "That sounds terrific. I'll meet you there."

The next day, Lois regained consciousness slowly. First she realized she was very uncomfortable. Then she stirred, and found that she was tied to a chair. She groaned. No matter how many crises she'd survived, they were never fun. At least she wasn't gagged. All she had to do was--

A man's deep voice interrupted her thoughts. "I do hope you're not about to yell 'Help, Superman'," he drawled. "Because I'm not really in the mood to help Superman. Why would I be? I'm the one who captured him."

Lois felt the pit of her belly go cold, and she looked around to see who this was. She saw a tall, middle-aged man, smiling with every appearance of good humor. His smile, however, failed to distract her from the evil in his eyes.

"What's going on here?" Lois asked. If he'd wanted her dead, he would have killed her already. "What do you mean, you captured Superman?"

"Ever the nosey reporter, I see," the man smirked. "You forgot the other w's--let me see, I think they were, 'where, why, what, who' ... was there another one?"

"Just answer the question," Lois snapped, trying to mask her fear in anger.

"Very well," he sighed elaborately. "This is a plot--I always have a plot, you know--to prevent certain events from happening in your future. I'm not going to kill you--well, probably not-- but I will be ruining your life. Except that I won't be doing it, you will." He laughed again, immensely amused by a joke only he understood.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm getting there, Miss Impatience." He reached out towards her, and she shrunk away, as much as she could, but he only reached past her to grab the edge of her chair and spin her around. She was now facing a control desk of some sort, and there were two video monitors. The reception was gray and fuzzy, and she squinted to make out what was in the pictures.

"As you see," the man explained, still sounding much too happy for her peace of mind, "on the left, is your partner and best friend, Clark Kent. He's locked in a cell, and he's not moving because he's been knocked out."

Lois stifled a gasp, it *was* Clark! She was doubly afraid now, last night's anger forgotten. He was probably hurt, or maybe even killed already.

"Meanwhile, on the other monitor," the man continued urbanely, "we find Superman, also unconscious."

"How did you do that?" Lois cried, furious and terrified.

The man snapped his fingers. "Yes, that's what I was missing! It's 'Who, what, where, when and how'! I knew I could count on you. And to answer your question, I did that with a fascinating toy I picked up along my travels to the future. It's a synthetic form of Kryptonite, which the researcher hypothesized would rob Superman of his powers permanently. I'll have to let him know that it worked. Oh, no, wait," he theatrically smacked himself on the forehead. "I can't tell him that, I killed him. Ah, well, that's the price of progress for you."

Lois barely heard him, staring horrified at the two screens. If this maniac could incapacitate Superman, what else might he do?

"Oh, relax, Lois, I really don't have any grandiose schemes. I mean, I could run for mayor or president, but it's been *done*. Simpler is sometimes best. All I have to do is destroy the foundations for Utopia, sock some money in a good stock fund, then skip ahead 20-30 years to find myself a rich man in a chaotic world." He grinned widely. "But first, I'm going to have a little fun."

Lois regarded him with extreme caution. "I don't want to know what you consider fun."

"And yet, you're going to," he replied with another laugh. "Isn't life a bitch? All right, Lois, here's the deal. I'm going to kill one of those two--" he pointed at the monitors. "And you get to choose which one! Isn't that fun?"

"No! You can't!" Lois reeled back, unable to comprehend the situation. "I can't do that!"

He shrugged. "Well, I suppose I could kill both of them, but it's really not necessary. Not that I expect you to understand that, of course," he smirked. "Come on, Lois, it's not that hard."

She glared at him. Her mind was whirling. For months now, she hadn't even been able to decide which one of them she wanted to *date*. The stakes were now raised to infinity. How could she possibly--?

"Let me help. You're in love with Superman, right?" he taunted, obviously enjoying this far too much. "So who's going to miss a farm kid from Kansas, compared to a superhero?"

"His name is Clark, and he's the kindest, gentlest, sweetest guy I know!" She retorted automatically.

"I think we have a winner! Congratulations, and thanks for playing!"

"What? No!" she screamed, but he ignored her, reaching out to push a button on the console. Lois watched in horror as Superman's cell was flooded with smoke.

"Don't worry," he patted her on the shoulder. "The gas works quickly, he won't feel a thing. And now, I've got to run! But I'm sure someone will be along to help you out very soon. And you don't have to tell them that you killed Superman if you don't want to."

She stared at him in disbelief as he walked out of the room. At the last moment, he turned and smiled one last time. "When Herb shows up, give him my love!"

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," Lois half-chanted, half-prayed as she searched the building for the rooms that she had seen on the monitors. They were in an old school building, which meant lots of rooms, but most were standing empty and open.

Beside her, H.G. Wells frowned in nervous agitation. He'd known that Tempus was up to something, but he hadn't been able to pinpoint where or what. Always before, Tempus' love of over-complicated plots had given him plenty of time to thwart the time-travelling maniac, but this time, he very much feared that he was too late.

Lois tried another door, and found this one locked. She pulled a lockpick from her purse and fumbled in haste to open the door. "Damn, damn, damn," she cried, wiping at her tear-streaked face with her free hand. Finally, the lock gave way, and she pushed the door open.

"Miss Lane, the gas," Wells cautioned, but she ignored him, and stumbled blindly inside. A wail informed him that she'd found something she didn't want to see, and he followed her in, breathing shallowly. He found her kneeling over the body of Superman. Lois was crying harder now, and gasping out, "I killed him! I killed him!"

Wells stepped closer and checked for a pulse, but found none. Superman's face was peaceful, and his body appeared unmarked. Wells was shaken to the core, but tried to retain some hope. Lois had said there were *two* cells, after all, and the other should contain Clark Kent. If that hadn't been video trickery on Tempus' part, that is.

He left Lois to her vigil, and continued down the hall. The very next door was locked, and Wells pulled out a multi-purpose tool he'd picked up in the future. This room was furnished the same as the other, with only a bed, and on that bed lay Clark. Wells approached him, and checked him out. Thankfully, the young man seemed to be alive.

"Clark, my boy," Wells said, shaking him gently. "Can you hear me?"

Slowly, Clark returned to consciousness. "What? What happened?"

Wells stared into his eyes, searching for signs of a concussion, but finding only confusion. "You were attacked. Do you know your name?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm Clark Kent ... I think." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "I was leaving for work, and then I think something hit me ... it hurt like hell. Where am I?"

Clark struggled to sit up, and Herb reached out to help him up, relieved to find that all was not lost. And yet, Tempus knew Clark's secret; why had he let the Kryptonian live?

"You were attacked by a desperate ruffian," Herb explained distractedly. "His name is Tempus, and his desire is to destroy Superman, and the Utopian future founded by--" Wells interrupted himself as he caught sight of Clark's forearm, which was marred by a long, bloody cut.

"Superman?" Clark repeated uncertainly. "If he was after Superman, why attack me?"

Herb swung his gaze up in startlement, meeting Clark's eyes. "Oh dear. You really don't know, do you?"

*

Clark stared at the strange little man who'd awoken him, and wished his head would quit pounding. This had to be the worst headache he'd ever had, not least because it felt strangely *wrong.* Almost as if he'd never had one before--wasn't *supposed* to have one at all--but that made no sense. Everyone got headaches, didn't they?

"What are you talking about?" he asked, cradling his injured arm. He couldn't remember how he'd gotten hurt, but then, he couldn't remember much of anything at the moment.

The little man stared at him for a few seconds, then gathered himself together. "Forgive me. My name is Herbert George Wells, and I, um, travel. And try to prevent tragedies such as what happened today." For an instant, his shoulders drooped, and he suddenly looked much

older than the 60-something Clark had supposed he was.

"What tragedy? Who is Tempus?" Clark struggled to understand.

Wells sighed. "I'll explain all, but I think it will save time if I tell both you and Miss Lane at once."

"Lois!" Clark stiffened. "She's involved, too? Where is she, is she hurt?"

"She's nearby," Mr. Wells assured him, "and physically she seems unharmed. Her spirit, however..."

Clark didn't wait to hear more, exiting the room and looking up and down the hallway for any trace of her. Wells caught up with him and pointed about the time Clark heard a muffled sob, and he tore off down the hall. The sight that met him stopped him cold. Lois was crying softly, stroking the face of Superman. Clark didn't even need to ask if the man were alive.

A strange mix of emotions flowed over Clark. He felt almost jealous of the dead man, a mix of anger and sympathy, and over it all, a sense of wrongness. This shouldn't be. He didn't know why, but this was impossible. "It should be me," he heard himself whisper, then wondered why he'd said it.

"Indeed it should," agreed Mr. Wells, with a strange sideways glance at him. "I simply cannot comprehend how this could have happened."

Clark stared at the man, puzzled by his attitude, but his attention was claimed by a fresh spate of sobs from Lois. That galvanized him to action, and he finally crossed the room, ignoring the dead to tend to the living. He sat next to Lois and gathered her into his arms. She turned towards him and burrowed into his embrace, crying.

Slowly, her sobs eased, as Lois regained control of herself. She straightened and wiped her face with the hem of her shirt.

"Lois," Clark asked softly, "What happened?"

"There was a man," she replied, her voice cracking only slightly. "He didn't tell me his name. He had a vile sense of humor. Everything was funny to him."

"That would be Tempus," Wells interjected. "He's attempted mayhem before, but we had always been able to stop him--you two and I, I mean."

Clark turned his head to stare. "I've never met you before."

Wells smiled, sadly. "No, but you will--or at least, you would have done. I don't know how this will affect things." He frowned, and continued in a lower, musing tone. "Unless this is a parallel universe, which simply hadn't diverged before now ... the death of Superman would be a dividing incident."

Clark blinked at that, but let it drop in favor of more immediate concerns. He turned back to Lois, who was sitting on the edge of the

cot, wrapped up in her thoughts, staring at the floor. "What did he do, Lois?" he asked in his gentlest voice.

She recited the terrible interview in a flat, unemotional voice, keeping herself detached from the memories.

Wells interrupted after she mentioned the researcher. "Oh dear, oh dear," he muttered to himself. "This is very worrying. I knew about that research, and in fact I tried to stop it, but they wouldn't listen. It was the theft of the gold Kryptonite that alerted me--"

Clark frowned, feeling somehow threatened. "Gold Kryptonite? I thought that..." he faltered, trying to force the memory. "I thought it was green."

"Oh yes, indeed, it is," Wells confirmed. "Or at any rate, the original is. But Simmons was trying to alter its properties, and he ended up with a form that he liked to call gold. More yellowish, if you asked me, but he got to name it. He claimed..." Wells paused, glancing at Clark's arm, then continued in a more somber tone. "He claimed that exposure to this gold kryptonite would rob any Kryptonian of all his powers. Permanently."

"Oh." There didn't seem to be much to say to that. "I guess it worked."

"Yes, perhaps ... but do go on, Miss Lane. What happened then?"

She concluded her recital uninterrupted. "And then he just ... left. I don't know how much longer it was until you showed up, Mr. Wells."

Wells coughed. "Yes, well ... I deeply regret--you don't know how deeply--that I was not more timely. I knew Tempus was up to something, but I didn't know what, or where. Usually his schemes are more elaborate, which gives us more opportunity to foil them."

Lois merely nodded, and resumed her study of the floor. Clark was becoming very concerned about this lack of reaction; it seemed totally unlike her. He thought back over her terse account of the encounter. How devilish, to ask her to choose. With a sense of shame, he remembered that he, himself, had wanted her to choose between him and Superman; had in fact wanted her to choose him *over* Superman. Now she had, and he could only feel guilt about it. It dawned on him then, that it must be ten times worse for Lois.

"Lois, are you okay?"

"No, Clark," she replied with an eerie calm. "I'm not okay. Superman's dead, and it's all my fault. I'll never be okay again."

Clark could feel his heart break at the note of despair in her voice, and he moved closer to hug her again.

This time, however, she resisted, shocked into movement at last. "No! I can't, don't you see? You're only alive because he's *dead* and it's just not right. It's all my fault."

"No, it's not! Lois--"

She refused to listen. "I just can't, Clark! I have to get out of here."

"I'll get a cab for you, then," he offered, concerned.

"No, dammit!" She stood and pushed past him, her voice starting to edge into hysteria. "I've got to get away. And don't come after me, either--I never want to see you again in my life!" She fled the room, leaving Clark stunned.

Jonathan Kent had just finished drying the last dish when the phone rang. "I'll get it," he called out, knowing that Martha was enveloped with her latest quilting project. "Hello?"

"Uh, hi, Dad," came Clark's strangely hesitant greeting.

"Hello, Clark, how are you?" Tucking the mouthpiece of the phone under his chin he turned towards the living room. "Martha, it's Clark."

"Not so good, actually," Clark replied, and he did sound tired.

Jonathan frowned in concern. "What happened, son?"

"Well, it's a long story, and I don't understand it all myself. It'll probably make the eleven o'clock news. Superman's dead."

"Err ... what did you say?" Jonathan looked into the living room to see how Martha was doing; she was on her way to pick up the cordless phone. That was good; he needed the reinforcement.

They both heard the click as she picked up. "Hello, honey."

"Hi Mom."

"Martha, Clark says that Superman is dead."

"Honey, how is that possible?"

They heard Clark sigh. "Some time-travelling maniac had some weird form of Kryptonite."

Martha stifled a gasp. "Clark, are you okay?"

"Me? Sure, I'm fine ... well, mostly. I think I got knocked on the head at some point, so my memory's kinda wonky. I was at the hospital, though, and they tell me everything should come back to me sooner or later. And they stitched up my arm."

Jonathan shook his head, feeling unable to comprehend all this. How could this be happening to his boy? It seemed only yesterday when the teenaged Clark had emerged unscathed from a tangle with a bull.

Martha sounded bewildered, as well. "But, Clark, what about your

powers?"

"My *powers*? You're kidding, right?"

Jonathan looked across the room at his wife. "Martha, get the bat. We're going to Metropolis."

She waved a hand at him. "No, Jonathan, he said his arm was injured; this is more than just memory loss."

"Mom, Dad? You want to tell me what you're talking about?"

They exchanged helpless glances. "Well, son," Jonathan finally began, "you're adopted."

It was two days after Superman's death, and Lois was still in shock. She'd managed to write the story of his death--part of it, anyway. Perry had filled in the gaps and smoothed out the style. Then she'd taken sick leave, and no one had challenged her decision.

Since then, she'd slept a lot, cried a lot, and eaten very little. The phone had been off the hook for days. Dan had wanted to come over, but she had told him not to. He hadn't known Superman, couldn't understand how this affected her. The only one who might understand was Clark, but she couldn't face him.

She'd tried rereading old books to distract herself--the television and radio were full of commentary on Superman's life and death, and she wasn't ready to face that. Some subconscious part of her insisted that, if she waited faithfully enough, Superman would return. He had to return, because he had to forgive her ... because she couldn't forgive herself.

It had been hard to face the fact that she had, however inadvertently, chosen Clark. She should have known, should have kept quiet, not said anything. She just hadn't known what to say, or how to choose. Even now, when she bitterly resented Clark's continued existence, she couldn't hate him that much. If she had the chance to reverse things, would she, *could* she, sacrifice Clark, even if it meant Superman's safe return? No. She wanted them *both* alive. Alive, and in her life.

And if she still wanted Clark, even now ... She was forced to realize that she was in love with her partner. Not quite the same way she'd been in love with Superman, but in love nonetheless. Not that it mattered. She didn't deserve happiness, and most especially not with Clark.

It was the evening of the third day following Superman's death, and Lois was just about cried out. That afternoon, she'd felt hungry for the first time in days. Her kitchen was now covered in empty Chinese-food cartons. It hadn't been as good as the kind Clark sometimes brought her--but she wasn't going to think about Clark.

She faced the rest of the evening with restless indecision. She'd

already read and reread all the books she owned, and watched "The Ivory Tower" until she could recite all the lines. Maybe it would be safe to try the TV. She pressed the button cautiously, and found a rerun of Dallas. Oh, good, more melodrama. That suited her mood perfectly. She was just getting into the scene when the program broke for commercials. She got up and headed for the freezer; maybe she had some chocolate ice cream left. No, no such luck. She shrugged, and bore the disappointment philosophically, until she heard the news announcer talking about the preparations for Superman's funeral.

She blinked her eyes furiously against the sting of tears, and lunged for the remote, cutting the report off in mid-sentence. Okay, TV wasn't safe. Now what could she do?

Distraction arrived in a knock on the door. "Who is it?" she called out, her voice rusty from disuse.

"Lois, it's me, Clark. Can I come in?"

Her first instinct was to say no, but after three days of her own company she was ready for a change. Besides, she had been pretty rough on him the other day, and it wasn't his fault that he was alive. She'd apologize to him--clear her conscience of this, at least--but that would be all.

"Uh, yeah, okay," she replied belatedly, then abruptly realized that she was wearing pajamas. "Just wait a minute, I need to get cleaned up." She hurried into the bedroom and found a sweatshirt and jeans. Once dressed, she stared doubtfully at herself in the mirror. Her face was pasty, with remnants of tear blotches, and her hair was untidy. Doesn't matter, she told herself ruthlessly. It's not like you're ever going to date the man again. Besides, he's seen you in worse. And he's waiting.

She walked back to the front of the apartment and reluctantly opened all the locks. Clark was still there, as she'd known he would be, and he looked more than a little tired and disheveled himself. Not that it made any difference, she still thought he was gorgeous. Stifle it, she told herself.

"Hi," he said softly, and waited for her to step aside so that he could enter the apartment. "I brought ice cream."

She smiled involuntarily. "Chocolate, I hope?" She closed and relocked the door behind him.

"Of course." He handed her the plastic grocery bag, and she took it, placing the contents in her freezer. Somehow she didn't crave it as much with Clark there.

"How did you know I'd need this?" she asked, not really surprised by his thoughtfulness.

"Well, I heard you hadn't been outside in days--I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a crowd of tabloid vultures camped out in front of the building. Perry sent a few volunteers to help building security keep them out."

"No, I hadn't noticed." Her eyes narrowed in anger and pain.

"Disgusting bottom-feeders. Thank Perry for me, will you?"

"We were all glad to help you, Lois," he replied softly.

Lois turned away so he wouldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes. The thought of her co-workers--she couldn't even honestly call many of them her friends--volunteering to shield her from the aftermath of her own stupidity was a bit much for her weakened emotional state. She swallowed hard and fought for control. She'd been crying for days, there was no point in doing it anymore.

She half-hoped, half-feared that Clark would try to touch her, or comfort her in some way, but he waited silently for her to get hold of herself, and she was grateful for his restraint. This was difficult, having him here. Best apologize now, and send him on his way.

She cleared her throat. "Um, listen, Clark," she began, turning towards him but not quite looking him in the eye. "I was a little upset the other day, and I'm sorry I overreacted. All I could think was that you were alive, and he wasn't. Part of me blamed you for that. I know it sounds irrational, but--"

"It's normal, Lois," he interrupted. "Besides," he added with gentle insight, "if you blamed me, you didn't have to blame yourself."

She nodded, unwilling to trust her voice.

He moved slightly towards her, his voice rising in intensity. "Lois, you shouldn't blame yourself! There was nothing you could have done."

"I could have chosen differently," she retorted angrily, meeting his eyes at last. "I could have chosen Superman instead of you, did you want that? Aren't you happy that I chose you? You'd been wanting me to choose you for months, even before we started dating!"

He closed his eyes briefly. "Lois, that was different, and you know it. And it was always a false choice anyway. Maybe I shouldn't have wanted that from you, but I was ... insecure." He met her eyes again, his own blazing with sincerity. "I **hate** seeing you suffer like this, Lois. What happened back there was not your fault; it was Tempus'. **He** gave you a false choice, too."

She looked at him, shaken by the stirrings of hope. "What do you mean?"

He touched her arm with his hand. "Lois, think back. Did you say 'please kill Superman for me'?"

"Well, no..." she forced herself to remember clearly. "He was taunting me. Wasn't I in love with Superman, and who would miss you anyway. And ... and I said I would, and then, and then ... he pushed the button that released the gas."

"Don't you see? He was going to kill Superman all along. He'd already used the Kryptonite. He just wanted to make you think it was your fault, but it wasn't." He stared at her, willing her to accept it, and repeated less intensely, "It wasn't."

She stared at him for a moment longer, absorbing this, then her face crumpled as she began crying once more. He moved forward, and she fell into his arms, holding him tightly as she released her guilt at last.

Lois didn't know how long she'd been crying, but she didn't think it was very long. The tears had done their job, though, finally--they'd released the stress. Now a sense of calm filled her. She sniffled, but refused to budge from the haven of Clark's arms. Realizing that Tempus had tricked her into feeling responsible -- that Superman's death really *hadn't* been her fault--had been such a relief that she felt slightly dizzy from it. And, it slowly occurred to her, if she weren't guilty, then there was no reason to send Clark away.... She looked up at him.

He stirred in response to her movement, and let her pull back a few inches to face him, but his arms remained secure around her. "Thank you," she whispered. "You don't know--"

"Shhh," he soothed, lifting one hand to smooth her hair back from her face. "It took me a while to figure it out, but I know. You're the kind of person who makes things happen, and takes responsibility. And then when there was nothing you could do to fix it ... well, I knew it would drive you nuts."

Lois regarded him steadily. When had he gotten to know her so well? And why had she ever wanted to keep him at any distance at all? "Clark," she said quietly, "this is why I love you."

He stared at her, an arrested expression on his face. "Lois?"

She smiled briefly. "I love you. I don't know exactly when it happened or why I took so long to admit it. Well, I suppose I had my reasons, but they don't seem important any more."

"Lois, I..." Clark seemed at a loss for words, but hope and joy flared in his eyes.

She took pity on him. "Kiss me."

A grin flashed across his face, before his head dipped and his mouth found hers.

They had kissed before, of course. But those had been either ruses to distract, or hesitant exploration. This ... Lois could only describe this kiss as *possessing* her, but she didn't mind; she was possessing him, too. Her previous calm evaporated, replaced by powerful stirrings of desire, a yearning for the most primitive reaffirmation of life. She twisted in his embrace, needing more contact. Almost of their own accord, her hands went to his jacket and began pulling it down his arms.

He broke away from her for a moment, breathing heavily. "Are you sure?"

She smiled, noting that he was busily taking off his jacket and tie even as he gave her the opportunity to back out. "Absolutely. I need you, Clark, I--" He interrupted her with another long kiss, and she

gladly abandoned her sentence. Her body felt flushed, positively scorched where he touched her, and she welcomed the heat.

They barely spoke as they stumbled towards the bedroom; clothes were discarded with little finesse. There was no time for subtlety or foreplay, they were both driven by the need to be together in the most intimate way possible, to share their sorrow and bind themselves together. To reassure themselves and each other that they were alive, and that life went on. Together.

Afterwards, they lay quietly for awhile, stunned by the sudden onslaught and quick resolution of their passion, their labored breathing the only sound in the room. Clark tightened his arm slightly, to be sure that this wasn't a dream. Lois was still wearing her sweatshirt, he noted wryly. So much for all his fantasies of how carefully and thoroughly he'd make love to her, if given the chance. Well, he'd make it up to her later. If there was a later...

He propped his head on his hand and looked down at her, worried. She was lying with her eyes closed, but with a big dreamy smile. Definitely an improvement from when he'd entered the apartment, anyway. She opened her eyes at his movement, and looked up at him, bringing a hand up to stroke his face.

"That was ... unexpected," he stated cautiously.

She laughed, her eyes twinkling. "It was wonderful." She cuddled closer, pushing him over onto his back so that she could rest her head on his chest with his arm around her. "We should have done that the first time we met."

"What, you mean in Perry's office?" he asked, amused and relieved. "I wouldn't have dared."

"I should have, though."

He considered that. "Yeah, maybe you should. I wouldn't have resisted, that's for sure."

She fell silent then, and he raised his head to check her expression. It had gone distant, and a little sad. "Lois?"

She flashed a smile up at him, but it faded quickly. "Oh, I'm fine. I mean, I will be fine. I was just thinking ... you know, about Superman. I will miss him."

He swallowed painfully. "So will I, Lois, so will I." He'd had a long time to think about it, these past few days. And it was time that he shared that with her--he'd intended to do so earlier than this, in fact. "And that reminds me. I have something important to tell you."

Lois looked enquiringly at her partner, best friend, and now, lover. "What does 'something important' mean? Please don't tell me you've got a wife and two kids back in Kansas." She tilted her head back so that she could see him, but her hand found his and held tight.

He smiled crookedly, in that grin that she loved, and shook his head.

"Mom would kill me. No. But I have been keeping a secret ... and I don't quite know how to tell you." He paused, his expression damping down to neutral. "I should have told you a while ago, I guess, but it never seemed like the right time. I was planning to tell you when I came over, but--" He gestured towards where they lay tangled under the sheets, "I got distracted. It's kind of a moot point now, but you should still know. It's part of me, a very secret part..." he ran out of steam, staring at the rumpled sheets.

"Clark, you're rambling," she told him. She could sympathize with his verbal wanderings, though; she was having trouble thinking of much beyond the fact that she was in love with--and in bed with--the most wonderful guy she knew.

He sighed. "I know." He fiddled with the sheets again. "Well, you'll think I'm crazy, but here goes. I am--was--Superman."

That shocked her out of her dreamy state. "What?" She sat up on the bed, drawing the sheets around her bare legs.

He glanced her way briefly, before resuming his study of the sheets. "Remember how I used to run off all the time? That was to go slip into the tights and help people. I know that sounds ridiculous." He laughed shortly, and she winced at the bitterness and pain she heard in his voice. "I wish I could prove it to you, by flying, or ... or setting something on fire with my heat vision--"

"Please don't set anything on fire," she interjected automatically, but he went on as if he hadn't heard her.

"But I can't. That gold kryptonite that Tempus had really worked. I don't have a single power left. So I figure you'll think I'm crazy. Or else you'll be really mad at me." He sighed again, his spleen vented for the moment. "I just ... had to tell you, that's all."

"Clark, I appreciate that you're trying to make me feel better. But it's really not necessary. I'm okay now."

He looked at her sideways, with a frustrated expression. "Lois, I'm not making this up. Remember Diana Stride?"

"You're telling me she was right?" She frowned. "But, but ... I saw you and Superman at the press conference!"

"That was a trick, Lois. C'mon, *think*! You're smart enough to put this all together." He stared at her imploringly.

She regarded him for a long moment, baffled by his insistence, then began to consider the impossible. True, with his glasses off, he looked the part. This would explain his odd behavior. And that bare chest ... well, that was too distracting, but yes, she could imagine it under blue spandex. She had seen it under blue spandex, in fact. Her mouth grew dry as she started to see the full, impossible, totally obvious picture.

Now the question was, what to do with the information. She considered screaming at him, but the past few days had been emotionally exhausting, and she just couldn't muster the energy to be mad. Come to think of it....

"Clark, I'm ... sorry for your loss. This must be awful for you."

He looked startled. "You believe me now? You're not mad?"

She shook her head, then smiled ruefully. "It's not worth the effort to be mad. And ... I just realized." Her smile widened with delight. "Superman's not really dead, after all."

"Yes, he is, Lois," Clark insisted. "I can't do any of that stuff anymore."

"I know," she soothed, "but you're still the guy I spent all that time with ... that I gave a rose to ... that saved my life." She leaned forward, touching his chest, looking him directly in the eye. "I loved the man in the suit, you know, not just the powers. I'm so glad that my friend isn't gone."

He stared at her, then slowly smiled. "And *this* is why I love you, Lois. You always surprise me."

"Good," she smiled sassily, "then we won't be bored."

"Never," he agreed, and reached out to pull her head down for a kiss. It was a leisurely exploration, this time, broken only when Lois sat bolt upright again.

"Clark ... if that wasn't really Superman that Tempus killed, who was it?"

"I honestly have no idea." He shook his head. "I spent the last two days in Kansas--took a commercial jet, and found out that I *hate* to fly that way--talking to my folks, getting my memory back." At her inquiring look, he explained, "When I came to after the Kryptonite exposure, I didn't remember a lot of stuff; I had no idea I was supposed to be Superman. My parents had to fill me in--they were going to come to town, but I figured I could travel easier than they could-- and then things started coming back. Anyway, I was out of town until this morning, and then I pulled a shift guarding your building, so I haven't had a chance to investigate. Plus, I needed my partner."

She smiled. "Well, partner, I think that Lane and Kent will figure it out."

"We can't print it, you know," he pointed out anxiously. "There are more than a few people who'd like to get revenge--"

"Clark!" she protested indignantly. "I'm not stupid all the time, you know."

"Hardly ever, in fact," he backed down quickly. "You're the smartest woman I know." He hesitated. "You just had one little blind spot, is all."

She kissed him as a reward for that sop to her ego. "Well, together, we can take on the world. First off, I doubt Tempus set this all up by himself."

"He had a flunky when he grabbed me, anyway; I remember it a little. But--"

Lois latched on to that. "We might be able to find him, then, although we probably shouldn't get the police involved, in case he knows who the other guy was. He probably grabbed the guy, in fact, so--"

Clark held up a hand to interrupt this hopeful sequence. "Lois ... they found the flunky's body on the scene; Tempus must have killed him as soon as everything was set up."

She deflated. "Oh. Well, at least he can't tell anyone that they've got the wrong Superman." She sighed as another, less appetizing lead presented itself. "Speaking of which, we'll need to get hold of the autopsy reports."

He shook his head. "According to the news, there won't be an autopsy-- something about respect and dignity."

"Ah." Lois looked at the half-naked ex-superhero sprawled on her bed and let herself be distracted to a more pleasant topic. "Yep, dignity is important to you, I can tell."

Clark grinned. "That was the Superman side of me; Clark Kent never had any dignity to start with. So whatever dignity I had is getting buried tomorrow." He stretched, getting comfortable. "I won't miss it."

"Yeah, about the funeral," she took a deep breath. "We probably ought to go."

He grimaced distaste. "Yeah, I suppose so." He pulled her down next to him once more, and she adjusted herself so that she could rest her head on his chest. "And then we can start investigating. It's going to be a long day." He hesitated, then offered, "I should probably go."

She tightened her hold on him, and smiled. "No way, Clark. We've got a lot of lost time to make up for."

They didn't get a lot of sleep that night, but Clark was able to fulfill not just one, but several of his long-held fantasies.

Superman's funeral was as grand as the City of Metropolis could make it. A somber procession, headed by the casket, wended its way through the streets from City Hall down to Metropolis Park where the burial would take place. Plans were already underway to commission a statue in the hero's honor, and several national notables were on hand to make speeches. Since Superman's religion, or lack thereof, was unknown, the actual ceremony would be led by the state Supreme Court's Chief Justice, with an assortment of clergymen saying their own manner of prayers in the background.

Lois and Clark didn't attempt to follow the procession, but they did have decent seats among the hurriedly-assembled chairs in the park, courtesy of Perry White. The Daily Planet had been given special consideration in honor of the paper's "special relationship" with

Superman.

Clark held Lois' hand tightly, needing her support to get through this. He was more than a little embarrassed at the fulsome praise heaped upon his alter-ego, but mostly he was aware of a suffocating feeling of loss. Only a week ago, he'd been able to soar where others walked, to help when others were helpless. Now his powers were gone, but the urge to help remained full force, and his new limitations were difficult to accept.

As they waited for the ceremony to begin, they heard a police siren off in the distance, in the direction of Suicide Slum. Clark started, then sat back, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

"Clark?" Lois asked quietly, squeezing his hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he replied bitterly. "I'm fine. I just--" He stopped himself, resolutely determined not to fall into self-pity.

Lois rubbed his still-healing arm with her other hand. "I know," she offered in a low voice, leaning near. "But you know, you can still make a difference. You just have to do it in a different way. You've done great things by writing for the Planet, too. Remember those nursing homes last year? You rescued those people too, and you can still do that."

He looked at her then, realizing that she was right, and grateful beyond words that she loved him. "I'd forgotten ... thank you, Lois." It wouldn't be the same, but his inner tension eased nonetheless. He'd seen Lois use the written word to perform great deeds for justice; if that was the best that he could do, he'd do it the best that he could.

Lois looked off to the east, trying to see signs of the approaching procession. She stood, and he stood with her. She shook her head. "I still can't see them. Let's go for a walk for a little bit, I'm too restless to sit still."

Clark asked Jimmy to keep their seats clear for them, then followed his love as she plunged into the milling masses, looking for a story, or at least a distraction. It seemed as if most of Metropolis had come out today, which was all the more impressive considering that there was rain in the forecast. Clark's mind wandered back to the previous night, and he had to grin. Despite his loss, despite the pain Lois had gone through, they had come together ... and that was worth the cost. It had been very hard to leave the apartment this morning, but Lois had insisted. Perhaps it would do them both good to say goodbye to Superman--not to his body, of course, but to his existence.

Lois dragged his attention back to the present with a swift jab in the ribs. "What is it?"

She pointed. "See that short guy there? We met him once, when Bonnie and Clyde were running around; he ran a lookalike agency."

Clark nodded, dredging up the details from memory. "Sammy, right? We were trying to find where they'd gotten their costumes, and then I had to go stop them from holding up a bank."

"Was that what it was? Well, whatever. I wonder what he's doing here? He didn't seem the type."

"Look, just because he thought you looked like Madonna..." Clark teased, but at that moment the man saw them, and his face lit up.

"Hey! I know you two," he said, moving over to have a chat. Lois started to turn away, but Clark caught her arm to keep her where she was. It wouldn't hurt them to talk to him for a moment.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Sammy told them. "I never forget a face ... ah, I got it! You're the two reporters."

"You read our work?" Lois asked skeptically.

"Nah, I don't have time, too busy. But you came in one day, asking questions..." Sammy looked them over closely, then focused on Clark. "Hey, you know, you kinda look like Superman."

Clark shrugged, trying hard to look casual. "If you say so."

"Yeah... you couldda made some money off of that, but it's too late now, of course. I been scrambling to try to find other gigs for Barry; now I finally found one, and I can't find Barry! I tell ya, if it's not one thing it's another, huh?"

Clark's hard-won reporter's instincts took notice of that. "Barry?" he asked.

"Wait," Lois interjected, throwing a speaking glance at Clark, "Wasn't he the Superman lookalike we met?"

"You met him? Oh yeah, I remember," Sammy chuckled. "You're the one who said he didn't look right--you had a picture of Superman in your purse."

She started to flush, then caught Clark's eye and straightened, smiling faintly. "Yeah, that was me. Superman was a friend of mine."

"Yeah, I bet," Sammy countered jovially, then looked around and sobered, reminded of the funeral. "Anyway, yeah, that's Barry."

"When did you last see him?" Lois asked, a bit urgently for Clark's taste. He didn't want to tip anyone off, if this was what they apparently both thought it was.

"About a week ago, I think. I called him yesterday to let him know I had a job for him, but the guy never called me back! I can't hold this job forever, you know, I got a professional image to maintain."

"And I'm sure you do that very well," Clark reassured him, somewhat at random. "But I'm afraid we have to go now. Good to see you, Sammy." He dragged Lois back towards their seats.

She put up with being dragged just long enough to get away from Sammy, then tugged on his arm to stop him. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Clark glanced around, no one appeared to be paying attention to them. "That Tempus killed Barry?" he asked, sotto voice. "Yeah. We'll never be able to prove it, though."

"No. But we can find out when he was last seen." She closed her eyes briefly. "I wish this were better news. It's awful that the poor guy might have been killed just as ... a side effect! He died because of us, Clark. I feel so guilt--"

Clark held up a hand to stop her. "I know exactly how you feel, but ... you can't feel guilty, Lois, and neither can I," he stated firmly. "We didn't kill him, Tempus did."

After a long moment, she sighed and nodded. "You're right. Thanks, Clark. What would I do without you?"

"Let's hope we never have to find out," he replied gravely, and pulled her close for a long, sweet kiss.

They parted, and Lois smiled up at him. "Love you."

"Love you, too." He hesitated, knowing how skittish she was on this topic, then plunged ahead. "So ... you wanna get married?"

She stared up at him, her brown eyes wide with shock, as her former confidence fled. "Married? You want to marry me? Why?" she blurted out, in a near panic. "I mean, I'm a workaholic, and I'm not very patient--some people have even called me difficult, can you believe it, well, of course you can, you've been there ... and I can't cook--I mean it, seriously, if it's not chocolate, or maybe pasta, you do not want me anywhere near it in the preparation stages ... and my last couple of relationships were, well, disasters, and I just don't think I'm very good at this relationship stuff."

Clark smiled. "Lois, I have known you for two years now; I know all about your difficult sides. And I can cook. I'll have to use potholders now, but I'm sure I can manage. And you don't have to be good at relationships with other men--I'd kind of rather you weren't, actually," he grinned, then continued. "You just have to relate to me. And from what I've seen, you've got that one covered."

Slowly, she relaxed against his encircling arms, and smiled tentatively. "I notice you didn't deny the difficult personality part."

Clark laughed. "I'm in love, not stupid."

She stuck her tongue out at him, then laughed in return. "Well, if you're sure you know what you're letting yourself in for ... yes, Clark, I'll marry you. But we should have a long engagement, just in case," she added hastily.

"Whatever you say, Lois," Clark agreed happily. "Whatever you say."

The long engagement lasted only a month, while Clark persuaded Lois that he wasn't about to change his mind. After they married, they settled into a townhouse in the city. With time, Clark came to terms with the loss of his powers, rechanneling his energies into investigating and uncovering injustice in a more down-to-earth fashion. And at Lois's instigation, they became involved with a few local charities, volunteering their time in soup kitchens, mentoring programs, and downtown shelters. Their volunteer work fulfilled a need for Clark ... and wasn't a bad way to meet new snitches and sources, either, which helped them to get even more stories. Lane and Kent were the hottest reporting team in town.

On this particular night, three months after the wedding, Lois was watching Clark cook dinner. As usual. He enjoyed the process of creating meals, even at normal speed, and she enjoyed watching him. He was chopping vegetables for stir-fry, and being extra careful. He'd cut his fingers more than once in the past few months, and hadn't seemed to enjoy the experience.

Lois glanced at her watch. "How's it coming, sweetheart? I don't want to rush you, but we've got to get going soon if we want to make it to the Neighborhood Watch meeting tonight."

"Almost done," he replied, kissing her as she passed him on her way to the refrigerator. "And it takes no time to cook this stuff--ow!"

"What'd you do this time?" Lois asked, amused. Years of invulnerability hadn't taught him much caution, and at first she had been extremely sympathetic to each of his accidents. They never seemed much worse than paper cuts, though, so she'd eventually been able to tone down her reaction to a more appropriate level.

"I caught my finger again," he replied, but his voice sounded odd--strained--and she turned to see how he was.

She didn't see any blood. "You look okay to me."

He didn't reply, staring at his finger in disbelief.

"Clark? What is it?"

Slowly, deliberately, he lifted the knife again, and brought it down, hard, on his finger.

Lois winced and started towards him. "Clark, are you crazy? Let me find the band-aids."

He turned towards her then, and she stopped short, caught by the excitement in his eyes. "No, it's okay. My finger isn't hurt."

She frowned. "But I saw you--" she stopped as enlightenment dawned. "You're invulnerable?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" He grinned broadly and caught her up in an exuberant hug, spinning her around. "What else can I do, I wonder?"

Lois smiled back, dizzy with exhilaration. "Heat vision?" She glanced around frantically, looking for something expendable. "A-ha! Here,

zap this." She pointed out the glass of ice water she'd just poured for herself. He lowered his glasses and stared at it intently. As Lois watched, holding her breath, the ice began to melt, and a minute later, the water started to bubble. "It's working! You're back!"

He pushed his glasses back up, his grin returning. "I can't believe it, I just can't believe it."

"But it's true!" Lois hugged him again. "Oh, I'm so happy for you! Can you fly?"

Clark frowned for a minute, then shook his head. "No ... I don't seem to have enough energy. It was harder to do the heat vision than I remembered, too, but I wasn't sure about that."

"It'll come back to you," Lois predicted happily. "Just wait a few days, I bet, and you'll be back to your old self."

"Only better," he replied, his eyes warming as he bent down for a kiss. "Because I have you."

Lois moaned agreement against his open mouth, and they lost themselves in the moment. Eventually, however, Clark pulled away, a serious look crossing his face. "Lois ... let's go sit on the couch."

"Okay." She checked to make sure the stove was turned off, then followed her husband over to the living room, and sat on his lap. "What's up?"

"I was just thinking," he explained hesitantly, "about my old self. The guy who used to dash off at inopportune times. Who couldn't make plans because he didn't know what emergencies might come up. The one who had to live a lie. It wasn't all good, Lois. I mean, yeah, I've missed the powers, but I also really enjoy our life. We work together, we volunteer together-- "

"We sleep together," she reminded him, to lighten the mood.

He grinned. "That's definitely the best part. But don't you see?" His grin slipped away. "If I become Superman again, things are going to change. I won't be able to spend as much time with you, and I hate that idea. And ... we're married now; this can't be my decision alone."

She cocked her head. "You're asking my permission?"

"No," he denied, "I'm ... I'm seeking consensus. This affects both of us, we need to agree about it."

"Yeah, you're right, I guess. I hadn't really considered the downside." She fell silent for a moment, trying to ignore the corner of her heart that was singing with joy. She remembered the days when Clark's disappearing act had hurt and angered her. It would be different now, of course, but he was right--this was bound to be inconvenient at times, to say the least. Every advantage matched by a disadvantage. And Clark probably would try to contain himself if she wanted him to. Her response now would have far-reaching consequences. She took a deep breath.

"Clark, I love you. I love our life, too, and I hate change. But ... I've watched you, these last few months. You've driven yourself to do as much good as any one human being could reasonably do, and that still wasn't enough for you. I've seen you mourn when you hear about disasters. Part of what I love about you is your character. And your character demands that you help others, to the best of your abilities. Superman is what allows you to do that." She paused. "I adore you for worrying about me, but you have to do this."

"Besides," she quirked a smile. "If you suppress your abilities for my sake, then I really would be responsible for killing Superman. And I'm not willing to do that."

He looked at her, then slowly smiled. "Oh, you're good."

She grinned. "I know. But forget the disadvantages for now." She stood, and extended a hand towards him. He took it, standing next to her. "Right now, I want to take my newly super-powered husband for a spin. I've got a few Superman fantasies that we never got to do."

"I am at your service," he replied, grinning. He carefully picked her up, and then the world blurred as he sped them into the bedroom.

SUPERMAN LIVES! by Lois Lane & Clark Kent

Metropolis--Four months after the superhero's body was found and buried, Superman has mysteriously reappeared, assisting in several areas around the city. So far he has given no explanation of either his apparent death or his resurrection, promising to explain all at a press conference scheduled for tomorrow morning at City Hall. So far, however, this Superman appears to be the genuine article; exhibiting both the abilities and attitudes of the city's most beloved citizen.

The first sighting of the returned hero was in the harbor early this morning as a foundering ship was rescued...

The following morning, in the kitchen of the townhouse, Lois put the paper down with a smile of satisfaction. "You know, it's so much easier to do Superman stories this way!"

Clark grinned at her. "I know."

She smacked his arm lightly. "Well, from now on, Kent, when you cheat, it's gonna be *with* me. I can think of lots of ways that superpowers could come in handy--and don't tell me you've already been using them, 'cause I prefer to think of this as my own inspiration."

His grin slipped into a smirk. "Yes, dear."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Never mind. When are you planning to show up at City Hall?"

He shrugged. "I thought I'd be fashionably late. That way we can

arrive together, and be seen together for a little bit. And when I fly in, all the cameras will be in place--the more pictures they take, the more people will be convinced that it's really me."

"Makes sense." She stood, and tidied away her breakfast dishes. "Well, if they can't start without us, we'd better get going!"

Perry had already assigned them both to cover Superman's return, so they headed directly for City Hall, and spent a few moments mingling with the crowd of print and media journalists milling around waiting for the conference to begin. After they'd established their joint attendance, however, they made their way to one side of the crowd.

"Think enough people are here?" Lois asked him, scanning the crowd.

"Yeah, I think so," he replied, his hand straying to his tie. "Time for me to fade away."

"Don't be gone long." She smiled up at him. "Your public awaits."

He stepped away, then stopped, arrested by a stray thought. "Do you have any idea how nice it is to be able to do this without lying to you? I always hated that..."

"This way is definitely better," she agreed, smiling to cover the sudden mistiness in her eyes. "But, looking back ... some of your excuses were hilarious."

"Thanks--I think. I'd better go..." he leaned down to kiss her briefly, then faded to the back of the crowd.

Lois faced the podium, which was bristling with at least twenty different microphones from different news organizations, and took a deep breath. This would actually be the first time she'd seen Superman in action since before he "died," and she wasn't sure what to expect. She'd come to know Clark very well in the past months, but she didn't have much experience with this side of him. Yesterday, she'd woken up in the middle of the night to find him gone ... that had been just a little lonely. Clark was so happy to have his powers back, though, that she could only be happy for him. She just had to focus on the positive side of the situation.

The excitement of the crowd alerted her to Superman's approach. She watched him fly slowly towards City Hall and settle in behind the podium, looking completely businesslike and reserved. She felt a thrill at his appearance, and realized that she had missed Superman. And at that thought, for a brief moment, her mind refused to accept the notion that this was Clark--her *husband*--that she was seeing. Then he glanced her way, very briefly, and she steadied. Yes. She knew him.

Superman held his hands up to quiet the barrage of questions, and the crowd slowly quieted. "Thank you," he said, his voice clear and strong, pitched to carry. "I have a statement to make. When I'm

finished, I'll answer a few questions. First of all, I am the real Superman. I regret that I've been absent for so long, but it was not my choice. I was not killed four months ago, but I was incapacitated. It has taken me this long to heal; I've returned to help out just as quickly as I could." He hesitated, then continued. "I know that I've been missed in these past few months. There were situations where my help was needed. Believe me, I wanted to assist, but I was simply unable to do so."

He paused again, and numerous hands waved as reporters signaled questions. He pointed. "Lois?"

"Thank you, Superman," she smiled. They had agreed that an exclusive interview with Superman would tie her too closely to him, so as a compromise he'd promised to let her ask the first question, instead. She was ready. "If that's not you buried in Metropolis Park--and I think we're all glad it's not--who is it?"

He nodded acknowledgement. "His name was Barry Wilson. He was a brave man, and his death gave me the chance to recover in peace. He didn't intend to die, but he was in his own right a hero, and I hope the city will take that into account when deciding what to do about the grave and monument. Next question?"

He took a moment to decide whose question to take next, and Lois hid a smile. Perfect answer, Clark. Enough information to get them digging, but they'll never be able to come up with the details as fast as the Daily Planet. Of course, it helped that Lois and Clark had thoroughly investigated Barry four months ago.

Superman picked a television reporter for the next question. "David?"

"Superman, who did this to you? And what's been done about it?"

"His name was Tempus," Superman replied. "He claimed to be a time traveler, and he certainly had access to unusual devices. I have not yet been able to take any action against him, but I will be pursuing the matter now. As far as I know, however, he poses no current threat to Metropolis. Connie?"

"How exactly were you incapacitated?"

"I hope you'll understand that I'd rather not say." He flashed a smile. "I believe the threat has disappeared, but still, I'd hate to give anyone any ideas."

He answered a few more questions, evading some pertinent details, and then excused himself to deal with an emergency across town. Lois watched him fly off with a lump in her throat. She'd forgotten how flat-out impressive he could be. It was good to see him back in action.

As the crowd broke up, Lois overheard two women commenting on Superman's physique. She felt a brief flash of jealousy, but then realized that was unnecessary, and stifled a grin. Eat your hearts out, she thought smugly. He's all that and more, but he's *mine*.

They had just finished dinner that evening when the doorbell rang. They exchanged puzzled glances, and Lois mimed pulling down glasses. Thus reminded, Clark x-rayed the entranceway and shrugged. "I don't recognize--wait, I do know who it is." He hurried towards the door and opened it. "Mr. Wells!"

The little man looked up and smiled. He was still wearing the strangely formal black suit they'd seen him in last time. "Mr. Kent," he smiled, and stepped inside, looking around. "Ms. Lane! Or, should I say, Mrs. Kent?"

"Lois will be fine, thanks," she replied, curious.

"Thank you, and may I say that you're looking a great deal better?"

Lois smiled wryly. "You didn't meet me at my best."

"Quite understandable. Well, I apologize for taking so long to get back to you, but I needed a little help configuring my time machine to work with this new alternate universe."

Lois and Clark exchanged raised eyebrow looks of inquiry, and Lois crossed the room to stand next to her husband.

"Well, you see," he tried to explain, "when Tempus succeeded in his little scheme--however temporarily--he caused a big enough disruption to split reality. There is another universe in which he didn't even get close to you, in which the Utopian Peace Keepers were a great deal more efficient in catching up with him. In that universe, at this time, the two of you are not quite engaged yet, although you--they--will get there. And fortunately, those two will avert the curse, and since that is shared history between these two universes, you don't need to worry about it." He coughed. "As you've already proven. But that hardly matters now. I simply dropped by to let you know that Tempus has been incarcerated--more securely this time, one hopes--and to congratulate you on Superman's return." He beamed at them, then, as if that all made perfect sense.

"Ah ... Tempus is locked up?" Lois asked, trying to pick out the important part.

"Yes, yes, indeed. The Utopians don't quite believe in prisons, you know, having little need of them, so they were unprepared to take custody of him at first. However, they do learn, and they're taking him more seriously now."

"As long as he can't bother us--or anyone--anymore, that's good enough for me," Clark stated rather grimly, and his arm tightened around Lois's waist.

"Yes, quite. At any rate, I just wished to inform you that he's been taken care of. And the gold Kryptonite has been safely disposed of, along with all the laboratory notes used to document its creation. So you needn't worry about that."

Lois and Clark shared a wary look. "Thank you," Lois spoke up. "We'll let Superman know when we see him."

Mr. Wells peered at her in concern. "Dear me, don't you know?" He looked disapprovingly at Clark. "I would have thought you'd have told her by now."

"Told her what?" Clark asked, not giving anything away.

"My dear boy, I understand why you didn't tell her before, but the two of you are married now! You can't keep secrets like this, it isn't right!"

Lois frowned, working her way through this. Somehow, this little man seemed to know about Superman ... well, he did say he was a time traveler. "How did you find out?" she challenged him.

He looked back at her, his expression clearing. "I've been to the future," he said simply. "Superman--and his wife--are the foundation of their society, their ideals and values. Your secret should be safe for a great while longer, but eventually the truth will out. And that, of course, is why Tempus targeted you. He hated the peace and harmony, and wished to destroy it before it began. By crippling you physically," he nodded first at Clark, then at Lois, "and you, my dear, emotionally, he hoped to prevent your union and, thus, your impact on the future. Fortunately for us all, his psychology was as flawed as his science."

"I guess that makes sense," Lois conceded, "in a twisted sort of way." She leaned against Clark to reassure herself of his presence, and he folded his arms around her in a sideways hug.

Mr. Wells looked away, seeming slightly embarrassed by their intimacy. "I must be going now, I'm afraid." He rose and headed for the door, and the Kents followed. "I wish you every happiness," he assured them earnestly, shaking both their hands, and then he was gone.

Clark closed the door behind him and stood there for a second, dazed by the visit. "That was interesting."

"Tell me about it. Not that I understood half of what he said." Lois reseated herself on the couch, and Clark joined her. "Did he say we have alternate selves, in another universe, who never went through ... what we did?"

"I think so. And if so ... that Clark never lost his powers." he sounded wistful.

"Yeah ... I bet they didn't have half the trouble we did in putting all the Church family in jail. And I imagine Barry is still alive and well." She frowned, and he tightened his arm around her in comfort.

"I know," he agreed softly. They had both grieved over that death.

She cleared her throat, then steered the conversation back to less painful ground. "But then again, I bet Superman got in the way of their personal lives, if they're only now getting engaged."

He considered that. "I bet you're right. All things considered, I

think I prefer our universe."

She frowned, still thinking of Barry, but then set that aside to consider their relationship. If Superman's "death" hadn't shocked her out of her indecision, how long would it have taken her to make up her mind? How many more times would Clark's disappearances have hurt her? The experience had been intensely painful, but she had grown because of it. She would bring Barry back to life if she could, but she wouldn't trade any other part of her journey. Getting to this place in her life had been worth it. Clark was worth it.

She turned in her seat to smile up at him. "Yeah. Me too."

THE END

End
file.